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# EDWARD W. BLYDEN AND THE WEST AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: RACE, MISSION, AND EDUCATION

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## Abstract

*Throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, education at all levels in sub-Saharan Africa was controlled by European missionaries and was essentially a tool of Western Christian expansion. As early as the nineteenth century incipient African nationalism inspired strenuous opposition to what was perceived as the inimical effects of an educational structure imbued with Western European ethnocentrism. Foremost among the champions for a system of education adapted to the needs of Africa and geared towards building African 'selfhood' was Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), a West Indian of direct African descent. Blyden achieved prominence as an ardent champion of black nationalism and became one of the fathers of Pan-Africanism. This paper reviews and evaluates his thinking on education in the African continent - notably West Africa - and the enduring impact of his ideas.*

## Introduction

Such is the weakness and imperfection of human nature that many even of those who bravely fought to remove the shackles from the *body* of the Negro transfer them to his *mind*...(E. Blyden (1872).

Edward Wilmot Blyden's fascinating life (1832-1912) and extraordinary if controversial legacy have received considerable attention from Africanists, African historians, educationists, and political analysts alike - notably in the

heady decades which witnessed the emergence of African independent states. That in itself tells its own story: for Blyden's legacy has been enduring. In the annals of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism, he bestrides the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like a colossus: a visionary whose idealism inspired and challenged his generation, and whose intellectual formulations still polarise opinion today. It is not the aim of this paper to re-assess Blyden's much touted political significance, but rather to review his farsighted thinking on education in the African continent - specifically West Africa - and re-appraise his dream.

Blyden was a West Indian of pure African descent (his parents were Hausa or Ibo) (Ayandele, 1966), who first moved to New York in 1847 and migrated to Liberia in 1850. His formal education did not go beyond High School (Holden, 1967); and it is of significance that he was reportedly "discriminated against by a white institution of higher education" (Wilmore, 1992). Still, the extraordinarily gifted Blyden learnt Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, showed a flair for mathematics, and made a thorough study of history and literature (Frenkel, 1978; Lynch, 1967). His long career encompassed the Church, politics, and education. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1858, was subsequently appointed Professor of Greek and Latin at Liberia College, and served as Secretary of State in President D.B. Warner's cabinet (1863-64). In later years he became Liberia's ambassador to both Britain (1877-92) and France (1905).

The pervasive *racialism* of the nineteenth century, and concomitant attempts to develop pseudo-scientific theories of race, largely defined Blyden's career and achievements. Hollis Lynch (1967) (his most prominent biographer) extols him as "easily the most learned and articulate champion of Africa and the Negro race in his own time", and insists that his "achievements... were the most convincing refutation of the oft-repeated white charges of Negro inferiority". Undoubtedly, Blyden, who achieved prominence as an ardent champion of black nationalism, was one of the fathers of Pan-Africanism. Endowed with a remarkable intellect, and a prolific writer<sup>1</sup>, he propounded his views on the Negro race with masterful logic and consummate polemic

1 He was the author of 90 publications, including more than ten books, of which *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (1887) was the most popular.

skill; this, at a time when popular literature was characterised by anti-Negro rhetoric. Some of his ideas were painfully idealistic. One notes, for instance, an exaggerated notion of the homogeneity of the African cultural heritage. But Blyden passionately argued that "the Negro race did have past achievements of which it should be proud", and "special inherent attributes which it should strive to project in a distinctive *African Personality*". He denounced the claim that any one race was inherently superior to the other, and drew heavily on historical data, as well as contemporary ideas on nationalism, to defend the intrinsic value and potential of the Negro. In his unquestioning validation of the race concept, Blyden was very much a child of his day, and to criticise him on this account has little historical value.

In Blyden's day, education at all levels was controlled by European missionaries and was essentially a tool of Christian expansion. Akinpelu (1981) points out that Christian religion and education were one and the same thing, even in the minds of leading African elites. The realism that "persons cannot be educated into conversion" was for long obscured by proselytising zeal. But Blyden's brand of African nationalism made him a vigorous critic of European missionary enterprise, which he condemned for sectarian competitiveness, disrespect of Africans, and disregard for their customs and institutions (Holden, 1967). He was convinced that the educational programme of missionary societies was calculated to erode the African's self-identity, undermine his confidence in African culture, and stifle his development. To the chagrin of many an over-worked missionary, he compared their efforts unfavourably to Islam, which he insisted "had helped to develop the 'African Personality', had kept intact most African customs and institutions (purging African custom of its grosser elements), and had acted as a unifying factor by transcending tribal divisions" (Lynch, 1967). "I give it as the result of my experience" he wrote in 1871,

that the Mohammedan Negro has lost less of the integrity of his race and fewer of the elements of independent manhood in his contact with his foreign instructor than any other Negro. The difference grows out of the fact that in imparting instruction to him his teacher has not striven to efface his race

peculiarities. His idiosyncrasies have been respected. He has been made an African Muslim" (Lynch, 1967).

Indeed, Blyden became an enthusiastic supporter of Islam and studied it to the point of being an Islamic scholar, acquiring Arabic in the process.

If Lynch (1967)'s claim that Blyden's ideas only reached maturity by the 1870s is true, it lends significance to the fact that it was about this time that he moved to Sierra Leone: a British colony whose educated class, state of advancement and other possibilities impressed him considerably, not least because he was "surrounded by co-labourers who are interested in the up-building of the race" (Holden, 1966). However, though one detects a certain cognitive dissonance in his failure to apprehend that the combination of elements which he found so attractive were the sum total of decades of European missionary and philanthropic enterprise, notably in the sphere of education.

## Education in Sierra Leone

From its establishment in 1792 as a Christian experiment, education played a significant role in the development of the Sierra Leone settlement. Early Nova Scotian settlers established numerous schools (See Fyfe, 1962); and educational growth accelerated with the advent in 1815 of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), responsible for educating some four-fifths of the population by the 1870s. The CMS established the Christian Institution in 1816 - named Fourah Bay Institution in 1827 - and started other schools in the capital, Freetown. By 1842 there were 42 schools; and out of a population of about 40,000, some 6,000 children (or 15 %), were attending school (Hanciles, 1988). By 1868, the number of schools had risen to 78, with an average attendance of 7,830- one in six of the population, compared to one in seven in England at the time (Sanneh, 1983). The first Grammar school was established by the CMS in 1845 to provide secondary education for boys, irrespective of denomination. Three years later, another for girls followed. By 1900, there were six secondary schools (Summer, 1963). The Grammar school for boys was a spectacular success. But it was the Fourah Bay Institution, specifically designed for the training of native pastors and

teachers, which remained the focus of the CMS educational plans for West Africa.

### Fourah Bay College

In line with a widely held belief that too much education made the African "vain and proud", the training provided at the Fourah Bay Institution was, for long, of a "contracted nature" (Cf. CMS, CA1/0 129/1, 30 January 1841, Rev E. Jones to Dandeson Coates). Confused attitudes about the extent and value of education for African clergy contributed to the stunted development of this institution; and even after the disastrous Niger Expedition of 1841, which considerably altered perceptions about the necessity of well-educated African clergy, the institution remained in a state of threatening collapse. In the 1860s attempts were made to put it on an improved footing by combining both a 'Christian' and a 'liberal' education; and its name was accordingly changed to Fourah Bay College. But it remained essentially a 'missionary institution' and wealthy Sierra Leonean parents, long accustomed to sending their children to England for higher education in the various professions, were unimpressed. "Parents think that if they are to pay for the education of their sons they must put them to something that will pay, rather than God's work" (CMS, CA1/0 25E/7, 6 May 1871, Bishop Cheetham to Venn).

However, an incipient African nationalism, nurtured by visions of self-government and reactions to European ethnocentrism, influenced the more keen-sighted among the highly educated African elite to press for higher education in the colony. The earliest call for a West African University came about the mid 1860s from Dr Africanus Horton (a Sierra Leonean physician whose adopted name denoted his African patriotism<sup>2</sup>). In a clumsily titled book, *West African Countries and Peoples, British and Native. With the Requirements necessary for Establishing that Self-Government recommended by the Committee of the House of Commons 1865; and a Vindication of the African Race* (published in 1868), Horton

2 Horton (1835-1883), the first African graduate from Edinburgh University, qualified as a medical doctor in 1859 and served as an officer in the British army in West Africa [see Fyfe, 1972 and Nicol, 1969].

sought to rebut current theories about the inferiority of the Negro race and to vindicate African capabilities. He saw education as fundamental to native advancement and "argued that it was the key to open up the unused potential of West Africa". He wanted Government to "take over full responsibility" for it, to found secondary schools and a teacher training college, and to make education mandatory (See Fyfe, 1972). Also a father of Pan-Africanism, Horton advocated a unified education system and recommended that Fourah Bay College should henceforth be made the University of West Africa.

Interestingly enough, Horton's recommendation for higher education was echoed a few years later by the European Bishop Cheetham (1871-1881), who implored the CMS that in order to produce "a higher order of ministry" and remedy Fourah Bay College's low image, it should be expanded (and upgraded) to become the University of West Africa, providing both religious and secular education (CMS CA1/O 25E/7, 6 May 1971, Bishop Cheetham to Henry Venn). However, the most decisive and articulate calls for a West African University were to come from Edward Blyden.

## A West African University

When Blyden visited Sierra Leone (from Liberia) briefly in January 1871, he met the recently arrived Bishop Cheetham (1871-1880) and several of the leading African clergy. He impressed the latter with his extraordinary talents (especially his ability to converse in fluent Arabic with learned Muslims), and was pressed to come to Sierra Leone (Holden, 1966). This was a "Macedonian call" which Blyden found hard to resist; and circumstances conspired to influence his response. A few months later (in May 1871), "political" and other questionable activities forced him to flee the Liberian Republic (Lynch, 1967; Holden, 1966); and he proceeded to England, where he offered his services to the CMS for work in Sierra Leone (Cf. C A1/L8, 328-333, 1 August 1871, Secretaries to Blyden; pp. 334-336, 4 August 1871, Secretaries to Hamilton and Lamb). The Society, with an eye on missionary expansion and Christian education, was more than eager to make use of his linguistic abilities and knowledge of Islam; and Blyden was appointed "a Linguist and Translator... with special view to the Arabic



language and the Mohammedan controversy" (CMS, C A1/M 18, p. 328, 24 July 1871, Venn to Cheetham). The appointment, and the salary that went with it, placed Blyden on a par with other European missionaries: a circumstance which guaranteed their hostility. Blyden's more controversial views - on the superiority of Islam, for example - were unknown to the Society when the appointment was made. In the event, subsequent claims in the Liberian newspapers that his enforced departure from Liberia had been on account of an adulterous liaison with the wife of President Roye overshadowed his appointment; though the news got to England too late for the CMS to reverse its decision.

Blyden's engagement evoked sharply contrasting reactions in Sierra Leone - predictably along racial lines. European missionaries expressed concerted dismay and raised a chorus of protest about the pernicious effect on the Mission of employing a man who had charges of gross immorality hanging over his head (CMS, C A1/O 25E/15, 10 August 1871, Cheetham to Venn). Bishop Cheetham observed, tongue-in-cheek, that Blyden did not strike him "as a spiritually-minded man" (CMS, C A1/O 25E/15, 10 August 1871, Cheetham to Venn). "Bad morals", he went on, "is far too high a price to pay for good Arabic". Meanwhile, among the African clergy and other prominent laymen, Blyden's appointment was greeted with excitement. The more learned Muslims were equally welcoming, for Blyden's command of Arabic and thorough knowledge of Islamic literature had commanded their immediate respect and regard. Never one to let down his supporters, Blyden unhesitatingly censured European missionary ignorance of Islam and ridiculed their aversion for any interaction with the Muslim population in Freetown (Cf. CMS, C A1/M 18, pp. 178-179, 28 October 1871, Blyden to Henry Venn).

To be sure, the European missionaries' moral outrage was a useful fig-leaf for their instinctive hostility towards Blyden; and, dominating the Society's affairs in the colony, they effectively blocked his involvement at Fourah Bay College and in the mission. Still, Blyden's inability to vindicate himself of the charges of adultery (beyond vague references to political chicanery) made his position as an agent of the CMS increasingly untenable. Too late, reports from Liberia purportedly confirming his innocence reached the

CMS. The Society had already decided to terminate his employment. The enterprising Blyden promptly gained employment in the government and thus maintained his connection with the colony and its educated class.

Freed from the trammels of allegiance to the CMS, Blyden's views about the inimical impact of Christianity on the integrity and cultural purity of the Negro race came to the fore more readily. *The Negro*, a weekly newspaper which he established with the help of five Sierra Leonean merchants, and of which he was editor, provided an excellent weapon. The paper focussed on the 'race' issue and other matters pertaining to African advancement and self-determination, and was adroitly used by Blyden to promulgate his ideas for a West African University. Blyden's views differed in important respects from Horton's. Like Horton, he was convinced that a university was most important "to give the people the opportunity and power of a free and healthy development - to bring out that individuality and originality of character and culture" (Lynch, 1971, p. 227). But his scheme was a natural extension of his conviction that European missionary influence and education had (unlike Islam) undermined the African's selfhood and advancement (Holden, 1966), and had "failed to develop 'pride of race' in Africans" (Letter of 5 January 1872, to William Grant- cf. Lynch, 1967, p. 93). He thus called for a university "where African teachers from both hemispheres, *including Muslims from the interior*, would teach students not to copy European models but develop their own originality" (Fyfe, 1962, p. 389). He declared that "if the people are ever to become fit to be entrusted with the functions of self-government, if they are ever to become ripe for free and progressive institutions, it must be by a system of education adapted to the exigencies of the country and race (Letter of 6 December 1872, Blyden to Hennessy, quoted in Lynch (1967), p. 95)".

He was equally emphatic that "Sierra Leone is the only place in the world where there is so promising a basis for the erection of an educational system adapted to our peculiar needs" (Lynch, 1971, p. 223). Thus the West African University "should be located in Freetown or its neighbourhood", and would be an institution where "parents here and at other points of the coast might send their children with the assurance that they would receive a training which would fit them for the practical purposes of life" (CMS, C

A1/M 18, pp. 272-273, 17 April 1872, Blyden to Venn). He claimed that there was a prevalent feeling among parents "that they would prefer keeping their children at home, if there were opportunities here for liberal culture", and contended that such training "would be, for many reasons, preferable to what they receive in England". Blyden argued that "the strain which the mind of the African youth receives when he is sent to England by the sudden transition which it undergoes from African habits and tastes to English modes often unfits him for usefulness when he returns home". Indeed, the common practice among wealthy Sierra Leoneans of educating their children abroad at considerable expense ended, in his opinion, "in failure, disappointment and reaction; simply because such education must necessarily divest them from their natural bent, or confuse the clearness of their native instincts" and subvert "pride of race" (Lynch, 1971, p. 224). Only proper training at home was likely to produce "the normal development of the mind" and generate "an enlightened patriotism" (Lynch, 1971, p. 225).

As for the details of the scheme, Blyden conceived of a university established "on a broad and liberal basis" (Lynch, 1971, p. 227); essentially secular, staffed by African instructors, and ostensibly geared towards the peculiar needs of Africa. In the modern African context, the curriculum he advocated would tend to mystify in some respects. Subjects of study would include world history (up to the French Revolution); Classics (Greek and Latin languages and all their literature - which he considered free from 'race-poison') and Mathematics; also Arabic and other principal native languages; and Biblical Studies (with emphasis on the original languages of Scripture) (Lynch, 1971, pp. 238-42). Naturally, the study of Africa and Africans was to be paramount and comprehensive: embracing "native law, tribal organization, native languages, native religion, native politics, and the effect of all these things upon their life" (Lynch, 1971, p. 266). It is also important to note that Blyden advocated education of women as essential to the progress of a country (Lynch, 1971, pp. 242): for such progress;

will be more rapid and permanent when the girls receive the same general training as the boys; and our women, besides being able to appreciate the intellectual labours of their

husbands and brothers, will be able also to share in the pleasures of intellectual pursuits.

The education of women was already pursued in Sierra Leone; but in many parts of Africa - one might say, then and now - this argument represented a radical notion.

## Reaction

*The Negro* claimed that Blyden's plan "met with the earnest support from all leading Natives on the coast, and from influential friends of Africa in foreign lands" (Lynch, 1971, pp. 241). This certainly included Horton, who, in a letter to Blyden asserted that "the vast field which a University will open to the grasp of the at present underdeveloped minds of Africa for general study and improvement, is so fertile with useful results that I fail to comprehend the grounds on which an attempt has been made to oppose its establishment" (Nicol, 1969, p. 100). The fact that the ideals of the scheme coincided with a groundswell of nationalist fervour and anti-European sentiments ensured popular support among Africans. There was, one might observe, an element of a systematically distorted rationality in this: for many of these "leading natives" were products of the European missionary education they rigorously condemned (I owe the phrase "systematically distorted rationality" to Kwame A. Appiah [cf. 1992, p. 15]). Unexpected and instigative support came from the Governor John Pope-Hennessy (a temporary placement in 1873), an Irish Roman Catholic whose explicit Negrophilism motivated the Africans as much as it sealed European opposition. But Blyden's idea of a secular, government controlled, interfaith institution, was calculated to stick in the throat of even the most liberal minded missionary. Smarting under the diatribes against their educational efforts, European missionaries wasted no time returning the favour. Bishop Cheetham, their chief spokesman, had a very low opinion of African capability and had observed on one occasion that though "an Englishman might be as hundred a native would be as three" (CMS, C A 1/O 25E/20, 5 February 1872, Cheetham to Venn). He roundly condemned the clamour for what he termed "a Godless University", where both Christian and Muslim would be accepted on equal footing; and, with a terse reminder that his own

earlier recommendation for a university had been ignored by the Society, now urged them to preempt the realisation of Blyden's scheme by elevating Fourah Bay College. He was adamant that the Society should keep the higher education in West Africa in its own hands "for a long time to come", spend money freely to supply teachers, "offer an attractive syllabus, with Christianity the pervading element...", and save us from the blight of infidelity" (CMS, C A 1/O 25E/38b, 13 March 1873, Cheetham to Wright). European opposition was not limited to the colony. In August 1873, a provocative article (entitled 'The Negro') appeared in the *CM Intelligencier*, and, inter alia, condemned both Islam and Roman Catholicism, reiterated that "Africa had no past", and denounced the scheme of a West African University as absurd, prohibitive, and visionary (CMI, IX, NS, August 1873, 225-250, pp. 233f).

The CMS reaction aimed at compromise. Determined to keep higher education in its own hands, the Society immediately recommended that Fourah Bay College be made "more of a University, so that higher and wider education should be given in it, and its door thrown open to any well-recommended Christian African who may enter it and [is] willing to pay" (CMS, C A1/L8, pp. 470-471, 10 March 1873, Wright to Cheetham). But, as much to accommodate nationalist concerns as to "prevent the liability of such an institution being established in godless hands", it suggested that "native Professors" should be appointed to the institution (CMS, C A1/L8, pp. 470-471, 10 March 1873, Wright to Cheetham). The call for "native Professors" caught Cheetham off guard: "Are the natives to be called Professors? - could it not be avoided? - need anyone be so called?", he enquired in carping tones (Cf. CMS C A1/O 25E/44, 9 April 1873, Cheetham to Wright). Previous attempts to add competent Africans to that institution had been blocked by Europeans; and the outcome of this last resolution was no different. Blyden had been out-manoeuvred. The CMS proposal was considered sufficient to meet the outcry for a West African University, and a year later Governor Berkeley (Hennessy's successor) gave his view that "Fourah Bay College, especially since it had been thrown open to laymen, possesses all the essentials requisite to promote that higher class of education in furtherance of which the establishment of a Government

University is by certain parties advocated (Cf. Holden [1966], p. 260, Berkeley to Colonial Secretary, 8 May 1874) .

Despite the publicity given to the proposed West African University in *The Negro*, it would also appear that the novelty of the idea wore off very quickly in the public mind. Reverend Sunter, the European missionary who took up the principalship of Fourah Bay College at the time the scheme was a major talking-point, reported that Blyden himself had "placarded Freetown stating that 'as the people do not wish to have a University at present' he will henceforth no longer advert to it in the pages of his paper" (CMS, C A1/M 19, P. 197, 7 June 1873, Sunter to Hutchinson, Cp. C A1/L9, pp. 15-17, Further Report of Sub-Committee upon matters at Sierra Leone, 1874). In any case, it would seem that Blyden's proposal had little prospect of coming to fruition precisely because its fulfilment depended on government funding. The British Secretary of State, Lord Kimberley, to whom Blyden propounded the scheme, remarked that "there is much in it which is impractical and somewhat visionary". He also added, significantly, that "just now... the attention of the British Public is rather turned *towards killing our native enemies than educating our native allies*" (Cf. Holden, 1966, 255). And without the support or financial backing of the colonial government, the idea of a secular university was unattainable. Ultimately, however, Blyden's thinking was too far ahead of his time to generate sustained coeval support; and only future history would appreciate fully the seminal value of his conception.

## Conclusion

The impact of Western education on Africa must remain a matter of debate. Blyden may have, forgivably, overemphasised its demerits as much as he wrongly estimated the timeliness of his scheme. Even in Liberia, where he resumed his involvement in higher education - as President of the Liberia College (1881-1885) and Faculty member of the same (1900-1901) - his ideas failed to elicit adequate support. But, to the end of his days, he continued to challenge his contemporaries about the need to "modify and adapt western ideas and curricula to African conditions" and organise a suitable system of education for Africa. His vision of a West African

University never attained fruition. But, in Fourah Bay College, some aspects of his dream were incubated. The College's status as an institution of higher learning became established with its affiliation to Britain's Durham University in 1876, and Freetown became a veritable "Athens of West Africa": By the end of the nineteenth century it "provided most of the African clerks, teachers..., merchants, and professional men in West Africa from Senegal to the Congo", not to mention 60% of Anglican "native clergy" in the region (Hair, 1967, p. 531). In 1918, six years after his death, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the CMS launched a "deed of cooperation" at Fourah Bay College, which embraced higher education (Shyllon, 1988, p. 109f); thus putting an end to the denominational rivalry which Blyden had repeatedly condemned as inimical to educational development.

Blyden's ideas, as Lynch (1971, p. 218) points out, have "influenced succeeding generations of West African educators and nationals" and "every African-initiated educational venture" has evoked his name and career. With time, education, particularly higher education, in Africa "encouraged a fresh interest in Africa's ancient heritage and undermined the foundations of the European colonial structure" (Sanneh, 1983, p. 127). During the period leading up to and immediately succeeding the dawn of African independence, a new breed of African intellectuals began to draw inspiration and ammunition from Blyden's ideas. Today, with higher education in Africa in deep crisis - witness the erosion of standards, compulsive brain drain, and cuts in government support (often due to baffling political priorities) - Blyden's vision remains relevant. And for the discerning, Eurocentric curricula still abound in Africa's tertiary institutions, ensuring a constant supply of what Appiah has labelled "europhone intellectuals". The dream remains...

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